

Table Talk

Table Talk is a strategy that provides students with an opportunity to engage collaboratively with their peers to process new information, solve a problem, or complete an activity. All students are accountable and have a shared responsibility in completing the learning task. The teacher’s role moves from “information giver” to that of a facilitator of learning. It is important that the teacher monitor the groups as they work to check their understanding and progress, ensure they students are on track, and encourage them if they get frustrated or discouraged.

As students interact in productive dialogue with their peers, they develop and hone social skills that allow them to clarify their thinking, ask probing questions, put ideas on the table, and consider multiple perspectives. Because students speak the same language, the time spent in Table Talk can bring clarity to an idea or situation for another student. In order for the Table Talk to be effective in promoting learning, teachers need to make sure students understand that they are accountable to:

- respond seriously to the prompt to further explore the ideas shared and develop a mutual understanding;
- use information that is that is accurate and appropriate;
- identify evidence that is relevant and logical; and
- use critical thinking skills to engage deeply in conversations about the topic rather than just surface level talk.

To develop their productive dialogue skills, students need multiple opportunities to engage in accountable Table Talk that will move them from passive, dependent receivers of information to active, independent learners.

Table Talk generally has four purposes:

- **Introduce new material:** Students engage in Table Talk to get the information they need before they begin a collaborative investigation.
- **Develop leadership skills of students:** Students engaged in collaborative groups are more involved than those “observers” who sit back and let the teacher and their peers do the work. Students respectfully listen to each other and take the lead in making decisions and monitoring progress.
- **Collect student thinking:** Collaborative groups investigate, process the group results, and share with the whole class. Groups benefit from hearing the collective thoughts of all groups to form a more complete analysis of the data.
- **Conclude an activity:** Students use Table Talk after engaging in an inquiry investigation or learning activity to clarify their thinking, rectify misconceptions, process the learning from the activity, or bring closure to the activity.

How to implement the strategy:

1. Give each collaborative group the materials and directions they need such as a prompt to discuss, text selection to read, or problem to solve.
2. Review the directions the students need to follow to complete the task.
3. Tell the students they are to work collaboratively together to complete the learning task.
4. Ask students if there are any questions and provide responses as needed.
5. Tell the students to begin the activity.
6. Rotate around the room to monitor student groups as they work to ensure they understand the task and are progressing and provide clarification and support as needed.

Variations:

- **Fishbowl Table Talk:** Have one student from each collaborative group join the teacher to form a group at the front of the class to engage in a discussion or solve a problem. The students work collaboratively together while the rest of the class observes what is happening in the “fish bowl.” Students can learn different ways of processing information and hone their social skills by observing the actions and interactions between the collaborative group members as they engage in productive dialogue.
- **Elbow Partners:** Teachers provide an opportunity for students to partner with an “elbow partner” that is sitting near them to briefly discuss a particular prompt or question related to the content. This provides students the chance to think about what has been presented as they talk with their partner. In addition, it focuses student attention and re-engages them in the learning.
- **Turn and Talk:** Like elbow partners, the students do a turn & talk activity for a few minutes. This allows students to talk about the information presented or shared and to clarify thoughts or questions. This provides an effective alternative to asking questions to the whole group and having the same students responding. All students have a chance to talk and be heard for a short period of time.
- **Chum Check:** Students turn to their elbow partner to check their understanding of the content.

Adapted from:

- Teaching Strategies: Developing a Community of Learners. Retrieved from Insights into Algebra 1: Teaching for Learning Website. June 7, 2012.
<http://www.learner.org/workshops/algebra/workshop4/teaching.html#2>

Additional Resources:

- Black, Paul and Wiliam, Dylan. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 80, No. 2. (1998), pp. 139-148.

- Garmston, Robert J. and Wellman, Bruce M. (2009). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups*. 2nd Edition. Norwood, MA. Christopher-Gordon.
- Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., and Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A Practice Guide (NCEE #2008-4027)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.